

A REVIEW OF MEGALITHIC SITES IN NILA (BHARATHAPUZHA) RIVER BASIN, CENTRAL KERALA

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ABSTRACT

Megalithic burials are part of the cultural remains of Iron Age that too specially in southern part of Early Historic period while in Kerala, in the absence of discovery of habitation sites, they are the sole indicator which provides information on the socio-cultural and economic aspects of the contemporary society. The Megaliths are major source after archaeological excavations in this region which is associated with the Iron Age culture. These remains includes various types like kodakkal, toppikkal, rock-cut sepulcher, menhir, urn-burial, stone circle, cist, dolmens etc. the total seventeen sites has been analyzed to have a better understanding about the cultural aspects of the period and region under study in this paper, an attempt has been made to also understand the megalithic culture and explored archaeological sites in Bharathapuzha river valley.

KEYWORDS: *Megalithic Culture, Kodakkal, toppikkal, Bharathapuzha, Cist Burial, Menhir, Pandoo Coolies, Rock-Cut cave, Taluk, Site & Typology*

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INTRODUCTION

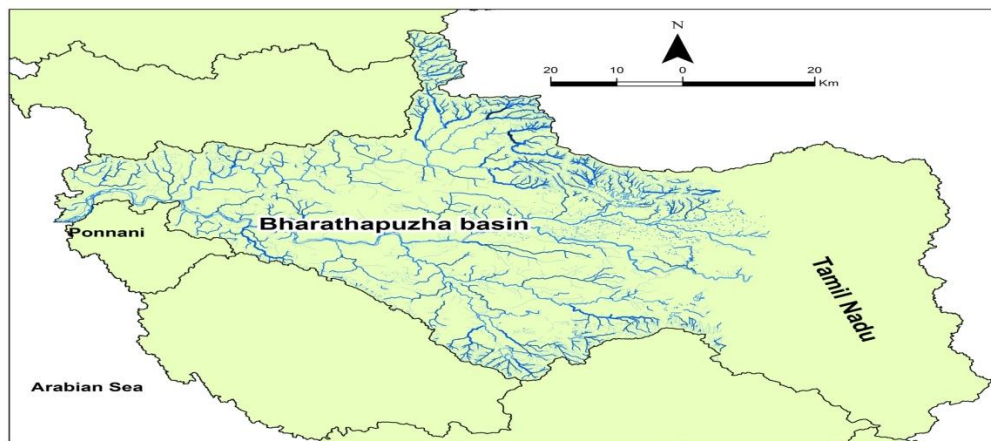
Geographically, Kerala is divided into three distinct zones i.e. the high-land, the mid-land and the low-land. This division indicates the undulated nature of the land. The present study focuses on the mid land region of Kerala. The State of Kerala, an extended strip of land, is situated in the southwest of India (Latitude 10.8505 N; Longitude 76.2711 E). There are a few natural passes/gaps along the Western Ghats on the east, namely Aruvamozhi and Chengottai in the south and Palakkad in the centre. The climate is featured by hot and humid and weather associated with heavy rainfall during June-September. The State of Kerala, reputed for the presence of water bodies, consists of 44 rivers and its tributaries, back waters, estuaries and ponds. The length of the coastal line is 560 km the Bharathapuzha river basin geographically occupying the centre stage of Kerala played the same role in the cultural area during the megalithic and early historic period (Kareem.1976).

THE REGION

The region of study is confined to Central Kerala, which include the present districts of Malappuram, Palakkad and Thrissur. It corresponds to the region with a longitude of 9°47' - 11°4' North and latitudes of 76°9' - 76°54' East. This area was chosen because it offers a wide variety in monument types such as and Dolmens/ Cists. Besides this, lot of data is available on each of these sites as this region was widely surveyed by number so serious scholars (Thapar 1952, IAR 1990-91). There are 44 rivers that drain the Kerala landscape. Barring three east-flowing tributaries of the rivers Kaveri, all rivers of Kerala flow to the west and into the Arabian Sea. The major rivers of the state are Valapattanam, Chaliyar, Bharatapuzha, Periyar and Pampa which all over are two hundred kilometers

long. Several other water bodies such as lakes and backwaters also characterize the landscape (Rajan Gurukkal 2018).

Bharathapuzha river basin is the second longest (209 km.) river as well as the largest river basin among the west flowing 41 river basins in the Kerala state of India. The river originates from Anamalai hills in the Western Ghats near Pollachi of Tamilnadu state at an elevation of about 1964 m. above mean sea level and is 209 km. long. Major tributaries namely Kalpathypuzha, Gayathripuzha, Thoothapuzha and Chittoor-puzha discharge to the Arabian Sea at Ponnani on the west coast. The river has a total basin area of 6,186 km² of which 4,400 km² falls in the state of Kerala and the rest in Tamil Nadu state of India. The river basin covers 1/9th of the total geographical area of the state. Eleven irrigation projects and several surface dams have been constructed in the river basin. The basin of Bharathapuzha and its tributaries are very rich in megalithic monuments. The river is known for the social and economic events in terms of cultural heritage and environmental aspects of sand mining. Historic event like “*Mamankam*” were told to be celebrated on the riverbanks in the memoirs of wars between Zamorins the ruler of Valluvanadu and other migrants. Many prodigies, like Kunchan Nambiar, Ezhuthachan, Poonthanam, Vilwamangalam, Vallathol, Melpathur, M.T.Vasudevan Nair, Edasseri, M.P.Sankunni Nair, Kuttikrishna Marar and P. Kunhiraman Nair etc. were fed from the cultural habitats of *Nila Nadi* or Bharathapuzha (Kareem 1976).



1: Figure of Bharathapuzha River Basin.

REVIEW OF THE PREVIOUS RESEARCHES

History of megalithic researches in Kerala starts with the discovery and excavation of a few burials at Bangle Motta Paramba in Kannur district by Babington in 1823. This discovery and excavations in the Malabar region like Puddiangaddy and Aelaparambu stimulate an antiquarian interest on these monuments. Subsequently several British administrators one after the others and many other scholars explored and excavated a large number of megaliths and published their findings. Another reference to sites in this area was made in 1882 by Robert Sewell in '*Lists of the Antiquarian Remains in The Presidency of Madras*' (Sewell 1882). A single Neolithic celt collected from the foot of the Kannyakode Mountain in Palghat region attests that Neolithic cultural elements had intruded into Kerala (Phillip Lake, 1891). In 1887, William Logan published a book titled '*Malabar*' in which he gave a detailed description on the explored and excavated megalithic sites of the Malabar region and tried to interpret the megalithic culture burials in connection with religious practices. Further Rajendran (1975) reports many lower Paleolithic sites in Palghat and Malappuram areas. Chedambath finished his doctorate on "*Investigations into the Megalithic and Early Historic Periods of the Periyar and Ponnani River Basins of*

Kerala" in 1997.

The village to village survey conducted by ASI and the reports published in 'Indian Archaeology- A Review' also brought to light many new sites (IAR 1970-71: 17, IAR 1978-79:10, 27, IAR 2002-03: 141). Vallath's 'Study of the Place Names in Palakkad District' published in 2005 also provides a list of the megalithic sites of the region. The available data on the megaliths of this region was collected and analyzed by Jenee Peter (2002) in her doctoral thesis 'Dimensions of Megalithic Culture of Kerala in Relation to Peninsular India: An Interdisciplinary Approach'. Another important study that focused on this region was made by Shinu Abraham's doctoral thesis 'Social Complexity in Early Tamilakam: Sites and Ceramics from the Palaghat Gap, Kerala' in the year 2002.

MEGALITHIC CULTURE

The megalithic remains constitute Kerala's earliest vestiges of standing monuments mostly of lateritic stones. These are funerary monuments locally known as *pandoo coolies*, often associated with human skeletal remains and burial furniture. The monuments conforming clearly to six main types have a wide distribution falling within the time brackets of two or three centuries before and one century after Christ, some of the monuments may be still later; besides yielding characteristic black and red ware of megalithic association, some of the megaliths brought to light russet-coated painted ware occurring in many historical sites in south India (Sarkar 1992). The Megalithic culture in Kerala is represented in the form of burial monuments and burial goods. The burials are secondary burials; hence the interment is fractional in nature. Megalithic burial monuments are widely distributed in every district of Kerala and are the most visible and common archaeological remains that are even familiar to common people. Megalithic remains can be considered as part of the religious practice of humans during the Iron age and early Historic periods pertaining to the death and belief in life after death (Darsana 2010).

The Palakkad Gap is the chief corridor connecting Kerala to Tamil Nadu and other parts of India, and thus played a crucial role in cultural, political, linguistic and commercial integration of South India. It is responsible for high summer temperature than in other parts of the state and also for the heavy rainfall during both south west and north east monsoon seasons. More than 164 megalithic sites are reported so far from this distinct ecological region, of which 63 are single burial sites and 101 are multiple burial sites. The burial types include urns, cists, dolmens, menhirs, rock-cut caves, kudakkals and topikkals (Darsana 2010).

The megaliths of Kerala reflect a unique blend of mortuary architecture characterized by forms common in the other regions of the peninsula and also by several forms unheard of in these regions retaining in a sense its own distinctiveness. The occurrence of various types of Megalith burials in certain areas can be discerned in terms of overall distribution of types. However, the presence of megaliths all over the region whether in the hilly areas or the plains is curious and confusing. The types found in Kerala may be described on the basis of certain distinctive features. The forms in Kerala are internally different with the same external features and preparing a typology for south India and Kerala in particular is rendered difficult. There is no consistency in the occurrence of burials having similar external features as the internal structures sometimes happen to be different or vice versa. Interestingly one finds consistency in certain identifiable features and inconsistency in mixed features (Gurukkal & Raghava Varier 1999)

DISTRIBUTION OF MEGALITH BURIALS

The megalithic monuments are found scattered over large parts of the Indian sub-continent with a dense concentration

observed in peninsular India. The geographical distribution of the monuments is divided into Northern India, Central India or Deccan, Eastern India and Southern India. The present political division of south India into Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Telangana and Kerala is followed in this study. The megalithic monuments show distinct characteristics at each site and differ from the neighboring zones in their construction in certain respects though there are similarities as well. There are local preference for particular types depending upon the local burial practice and the availability of suitable rock materials for the construction of graves, but there are some broad features which are common to all (Satyamoorthi.1994)

The South Indian megaliths are usually made of granite, sandstone slabs or laterite blocks. They are usually found on the slopes of hills or rocky outcrops or high ground with an irrigation tank or arable land. In the southern region like Tamil Nadu, the megalithic culture gets permeated throughout Chengalpetu, Pudukottai, Tiruchirrapalli, Salem, Coonoor, Dooam, Chennai, and Coimbatore etc.

In Kerala the megaliths are commonly found and exhibit certain district traits which are unique to the region. The study of the megalithic culture began with the finding of a rock-cut chamber from Banglamottaparamba in Kannur by Babington in 1823. Since then systematic explorations and excavations have been undertaken in different parts of Kerala. The distribution of megaliths is based on the availability of the raw materials. Kerala is characterized by high land, mid land and coastal area. In the upper part of Kerala which is highly rocky and lateritic region dolmen and rock-cut caves are the dominant type. In the central part, which consists of the low lying areas, it is dominated by the menhir, topikkal, kudakkal etc, in the Kerala megalithic monuments were mainly identified from the Porkalam, Machad, Pazhayanur, Eyyal, Anakkara, Palakkad, Perinthalmanna etc. (Satyamoorthi.1994).

Typology of Megalithic Monuments

A variety of these monuments are found in the Iron Age sites of Kerala. Initial attempts in devising a suitable typology for these monuments were made by Wheeler at Brahmagiri (Wheeler 1948). A detailed typology of the megaliths in Kerala has not been adequately worked out or done as exhaustively as has been done in the neighboring states like Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. Various types of burials such as urns, pits, cists, and dolmens marked by stone/cairn-circles, menhir, alignments and rock-cut tombs are found in the region. Among the Kerala megaliths, burials/monuments with an urn or a pit and a single chambered dolmen or cist are common. Dolmens and cists with two or more chambers and multiple pits/urns/dolmen within a stone circle/stone enclosure also occur at a few sites. They probably indicate the number of person buried/commemorated. There are local names such as *Kodakkal*, *Topikkal*, rock-cut cave (*Muniyara*, *Munimata*, *Guha*) to indicate the types (Gurukkal.1999). Below some of the important features of megalith has been discussed in the respects of seventeenth explored sites

EXPLORED SITES IN THE AREA

Anakkara

The site Anakkara (N.10° 49'00.92 E. 76° 02'13.01) is situated in Thrithala block, Pattambi Taluk in Palakkad district. Bharatha puzha, Kappur, Pattithara, and Panniyur are the nearby places and the site bordered in Malappuram district. The site is drained by Bharatha Puzha River. The nearest town is Edapal. The site is situated on 30 meter above the sea level. Typologically it is a megalithic rock-cut cave and extensively found all over the laterite bed. It is a multi chambered rock-cut cave with horizontal entrance along with steps leading to them. Surprisingly one stone bench in the cave was also

found. The rock-cut cave revealed their remarkable skill in designing and executing structures. Carnelian beads, fragmented potteries, painted black ware and red ware are excavated

Alathur

The site Alathur (N.10° 39'30.45 E. 76° 32'42.39) situated in Alathur Gramapanchayath, Alathur block, Palakkad district. The site situated at the south west end of the district and 24 kilometers away from the Palakkad town. It located along the Coimbatore –Cochin national highway NH47. The site situated 65 meters above the sea level. The site bordered in Kuthanoor, Melarkkad, Vadakkenchery, Erumayur, Kavassery. It is a hilly forest area. The site drained by Gayathri River. Typologically it is a megalithic urn burial site. The urn placed on almost 2 meter below the surface. The urn is completely destroyed. No significant artifacts were recovered from the urn.

Kappur

Kappur (N.10° 48'22.08 E.76° 13'19.70) is a megalithic site which is located within the Palakkad district, in Pattambi Taluk. The present area is now a personal property of Ibrahim Kutty, master in Marayamkunnu, Kappur Grama panchayath, Thrithala block. The site is just 31 meters above sea level. Bharathapuzha river flows just 8 kilometer away. The site is very much disturbed due to wall construction of the house. The site can be approached through Koonamuchi-Changaramkulam road. At the time of Tipu sultan, this road was used to connect Ponnani to Palakkad fort. This area is now totally used for personal purpose of the owner. Natives mention that the umbrella site was constructed by demons. The umbrella stone was 6 feet 3 inch height. This umbrella stone is in a fragile condition due to thick growth of vegetation. The entire umbrella stone is now partially broken. Typologically the site is a megalithic umbrella stone site. Only one umbrella stone has been discovered from this site. The umbrella stone was fully up to the surface. No surface markers were associated with the umbrella stone.

Kadambazhipuram

The Kadambazhipuram (N.10° 52'11.13 E. 76° 26'57.38) site is situated within Kadambazhipuram Panchayat, Pullundaserry desam, Ottappalam Taluk in Palakkad district. Now the site is under the ownership of Prabhakaran Nair, Iswarya Nivas, and Pullundaserry. The site is located near Kadambazhipuram Gayathri junction at Cheruplaserry-Palakkad road. The site is 8 kilometers away from Cheruplaserry town. It is a newly discovered site. The site drained by Kanjirapuzha river. Typologically it is a megalithic cist burial. The burial is now almost in destroyed condition. Years back, there were two chambers, but now-a-days it is almost destroyed. The slab of the burial is constructed with granites. Only two slabs are visible while the others are within the soil. Living human bodies are covered within the burial; there is a myth behind this burial site.

Kolapulli

The site Kolapulli (N.10° 47'14.68 E.76° 10'47.21) is situated in Shornur municipality, Ottapalam Taluk, Palakkad district. This site is situated in 2 kilometers away from the Shornur town. It is at the junction between Guruvayur-Palakkad road and Shornur bypass road which branches off towards Thrissur. Shornur, Koonathara Vadanamkurussy is the nearby places. The site can be approached through Palakkad-Guruvayur road. The site is drained by Bharathapuzha River. Typologically it is megalithic cist burial site. Now the cist is completely destroyed by the human intervention. It has also been highly affected by the heavy growth of vegetation.

Kulukkaloore

The site Kulukkaloore (N.10° 51'54.77 E. 76° 13'49.84) is a village in Pattambi Taluk, Palakkad district. It is located 54 kilometers away from the Palakkad town, 9 kilometers away from Pattambi town. This site is surrounded by Perinthalmanna, Thrithala Koppam, and Mankada. The site shares border with Palakkad, Malappuram and Thrissur districts. The site is 21 meters above the sea level. The site drained by Thuthapuzha river, tributary of Bharathapuzha river. The site can be approached through Perinthalmanna-Pattambi road. Typologically the site is a megalithic cist burial. It has been formed out of granite slabs. One of the side slabs has a circular porthole. Now one slab is destroyed by human invention. The cist is partially destroyed now.

Malampuzha

In Malambuzha (N.10° 49'37.66 E.76° 43'02.04) site, a megalithic cist burial is situated. The site is situated in Kava, Malambuzha block, Palakkad Taluk, Palakkad district. The site is situated 124 meter above the sea level. The site is near at Malambuzha dam, which is the largest reservoir in Kerala, located near Palakkad in south. The scenic hills of the Western Ghats are visible in the background. The Malambuzha River, tributary of Bharathapuzha, is near the Malambuzha site. From Palakkad it is at a distance of 10 kilometers. The nearest town is Palakkad. Typologically it is a megalithic cist burial site. The burial site has been constructed with four slabs made out of laterite. The site is situated in Malampuzha river valley. The cist is partially destroyed. Five others cists are also found nearby the site. The area is surrounded by water. All cist burials are partially destroyed.

Muppuzha

The site Muppuzha (N.10° 41'56.92 E. 76° 32'03.21) is a megalithic Dolmen site. Now the site is owned by Veshu, Vattokkattuparambu. The site is 30 kilometers away from Palakkad town. The site is in Kuthanoor Grama panchayath, Kuzhalmandham block, Alathur Taluk. The site situated 86 meter above the sea level. Malampuzha river flows just 15 kilometer away. Typologically, the megalithic burial is of port-hole cists. A port-hole cist is a box like structure constructed out of four or five dressed granite and enclosed by a cap stone. The cist is now unprotected, and partially destroyed. Muppuzha in Kuthanur panchayath in Alathur Taluk site 30 kilometers away from Palakkad.

Nagalassery

The site Nagalassery (N.10° 44'13.62 E.76° 06'26.45) is situated in Nagalassery panchayath Kootanad, Pattambi Taluk, Palakkad district. This place is situated in border of Thrissur district and Malappuram district. Pattambi town is 9 kilometers away from the site. Bharathapuzha river flows just 10 kilometer away. Two major roads to Kootanad junction is from Palakkad- Guruvayoor and from Palakkad- Ponnani road. This site surrounded by Thrithala, Kuttupatha, Chathanoor, Chaliserry. Typologically it is megalithic urn burial site. The red colored urn was placed almost 1.6 meters below the surface. Now the urn has been destroyed.

Ongaloor

The site Ongaloor (N.10° 49'13.08 E.76° 02'23.38) situated in Pattambi block, Pattambi Taluk, Palakkad district. This site is surrounded by Pattambi panchayath, Koppam, Bharathapuzha River, and Shornur. The name has been derived from two words, *ongal* means hills, mountains or hill valley the word urn mean village, so the word Ongaloor mean hill village. The site is 21meters above the sea level. Bharathapuzha river flows just 7 kilometer away. It is located 55 km towards west

from Palakkad town and 4 kilometer away from Pattambi town. Typologically the site is megalithic umbrella stone from a unique type of burial in Kerala. Made of laterite, they have four clino- stones. The shape of the entire structure resembles a mushroom. It is otherwise known as kudakkal. It is made out of dressed laterite. This burial has been destroyed by high range of vegetation. It is a reported site.

Pattambi

The site Pattambi (N.10° 49'24.86 E.76° 11'47.48) is situated in Pattambi panchayath, Pattambi Taluk, in Palakkad district. It is located 59 kilometers towards Palakkad Taluk. The site Pattambi is bounded by Thrithala, Shornur, Kuttipuram, Pallipuram. The site drained by Bharathapuzha river. The site is 21 kilometers above sea mean level. Typologically the site is megalithic urn burial site. The urn was placed almost 1.75 meters below the surface. The urn was partially destroyed. The site is a paddy cultivation area. No significant artifacts were recovered from the urn. Now the urn is destroyed.

Pudussery

The site Pudussery (N.10° 40'21.64 E.76° 42'11.46) situated in Chitur Taluk, Palakkad district. It is located in 24 kilometer towards east from the Palakkad town and 8 kilometer away from the Chittur town. The site surrounded by Palakkad, Malampuzha, Thathamangalam, Valparai. The site situated in 105 meter above the sea level. The site drained by Gayathripuzha the tributary of Bharathapuzha river. Typologically it is megalithic dolmenoid cist burial site. The cist is completely destroyed condition. Only two slabs are visible one and others are destroyed. The site is situated in a hilly area and because of heavy vegetation the site is in threat.

Pookottukavu

The site Pookottukavu (N.10° 52'01.97 E.76° 24'38.27) is situated 5 km away from Cherpullassery town, Pookoottukavu panchayath, Ottapalam Taluk of Palakkad district. The site is situated in a rubber estate. The natives believe that this hood stones is a grave. The site is approach through Cherpulassery-Palakkad road, by Punchapadam. Thoothpuzha river flows 15 kilometer away from the site. Typologically the site is a megalithic hood stone site; two sets of hood stones were discovered in this site. This is an unreported site. Two sets of large elongated rock slabs were discovered at the site. The rock slabs were placed next to each other with a distance of just one meter. The slab is almost of the same height. No surface markers were associated with in the hood stones.

Thaneercode

The site Thaneercode (N.10° 46'41.46 E.76° 04'43.08) is situated 12 km. away from Pattambi town, Pattithara village, Pattambi Taluk of Palakkad district. The present area is now controlled by Pattithara Grama panchayath. The site is almost 27 meters above the mean sea level. The site is also known as Parappuram. The site is located in a paddy field. Now the site is used for agricultural purposes. Bharathapuzha river flows 15 kilometer away from the site. A single umbrella stone was reported in this site. And the people believe that this umbrella stone has a divine connection and were created by God himself. The site is drained by several ponds around it. The site has extensive laterite formation; the color of the soil is red. Nearest district is Malappuram which is 3 kilometers away from the site. The site can be approached through Pattambi-Eadappal road, by Thaneercode-Thozhukara road. A village road from Thozhukkara to Parappuram connects the site with Main road. Typologically the site is a megalithic umbrella stone. A single umbrella stone were noticed in this site and no

damages reported about umbrella stone. Now it is preserved as good condition. This is a reported site in the Palakkad district.

Thonipadam

The site Thonipadam (N.10° 40'20.26 E. 76° 30'24.94) is situated in a Tarur village Alathur block, Palakkad district. The site is 8 kilometer away from Alathur town. The site situated 56 meter above the sea level. Gayathripuzha river flows 5 kilometer away from the site and also the site drained by Malampuzha cannel. The site located in a plain area surrounded by paddy cultivation. Typologically it is megalithic urn burial discovered from this site. It is locally called as nannagadies. These urns are mainly found in a pit with human skeletal remains. The urn burial was placed 1.8 meters below the surface and reddish color, no lid in the urn.

Vaniyamkulam

The megalithic site of Vaniyakulam (N.10° 47'42.76 E.76° 21 35.07) is situated at Ottupara in Vaniyamkulam, Ottappalam Taluk, Palakkad district. Bharathapuzha river flows 8 kilometer away from the site. It is a three benched rock-cut cave. It is also known as Mullanmada. Now the place is under the ownership of Kanampattil Kuttan. The site is within a rubber estate. Around this site, there is a laterite cutting place situated. It is a hilly area. Now the site is unprotected and it is partially damaged. This site was reported by a famous archaeologist Robbert Sewell. The site is situated at Ottupara kunnu within Vaniyamkulam town in Pattambi- Palakkad road.

Vellinezhi

The site Vellinezhi (N.10° 54'19.11 E. 76° 21'35.07) is a megalithic site, situated 5 km away from Cherpulassery town, Vellinezhi panchayath, Ottapalam Taluk, Palakkad district. The present area is controlled by Vellinezhi Gramapanchayath, Kuruvattoor ward. Thoothapuzha river flows 6 kilometer away from the site. The site can be approached through Kuruvattoor- Kottilugalpadi by Adakaputhur road. Typologically, the site is a megalithic rock-cut cave. Red and black pottery, iron object, etc were discovered from the site. There is a myth behind this cave, people from this area believed that some saints use this cave as their shelter. The soil in this area is gravel. A canal passes around this cave which starts from Kanjirappuzha dam.

Summary

The history of megaliths research in Kerala started with the discovery and excavation of a few burials at Bangle-mottaparamb in Kannur district by Babington in 1823. Megalithic are funerary monuments represented by various types and sizes. The term megalith means big stones. Megalithic monuments are the main archaeological findings of Kerala to reinterpret her past history. Pre historic period can be reconstructed with the help of archaeological evidences. Many megalithic sites have been excavated and explored all over Kerala. These people constructed burial monuments in granite and laterite as it was locally available in these areas. Kerala is rich in megalithic monuments, viz. rock-cut caves, rock-cut pits, urn burials, Umbrella stones, (*Kudakkallu*) hat stones (*toppikkallu*), slab cists, Port-holed cists, dolmens, menhirs, multiple hood stones and stone circles. Among these monuments, the most typical of the megalithic burials is the port – holed cist. The megalithic monuments in Kerala have more historical importance. Through the study of megalithic sites of Kerala, we can reconstruct its early history.

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